

Luke 4:1-13

The Christian Faith is not built on the little word “if.” “If” does not speak of certainty. “If” makes everything provisional. “I will do this provided you do that.” “If you work hard enough, you may get a raise.” “If you study, your grades should improve.” “If you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” We may use the word “if” a lot in our conversations, but God does not. He does not love you provisionally. His mercy and grace are not upon you provided you do something in return. His promises are not “iffy.” They are sure and certain. The “if” word is not found much in God’s language, but it is in Satan’s.

Three times he tempted Jesus in the desert and each temptation had, as its basis, the word “if.” “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” “If you worship me, all this will be yours.” “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”

Satan’s speech is full of the word “if.” Sometimes the word is spoken; often it’s implied. To our first parents his meaning was clear: “If you eat this fruit, you will be like God.” To Peter the meaning was, “If you deny Jesus, you will save your own skin.”

Satan works much the same way today. The temptations that you and I face are often built on the word “if.” “If you steal this candy bar, no one will notice.” “If the IRS doesn’t know about that income, it’s not wrong if you don’t report it on your tax return.” “If he doesn’t apologize, it’s okay if you don’t forgive him.”

Satan’s temptations are all about creating doubt. He wants us to doubt what God has said, and so that word “if” is very useful to him—because by its very nature it promotes doubt over certainty. To Jesus he said, “If you are the Son of God...” To us he says something very similar: “If you really are sons of God...If God is your dear Father, as you claim, then why does He allow you to suffer? And why doesn’t He give you more blessings than the unbelievers have? They have nice homes and cars. They have more money, take better vacations, and have more fun in life. If you really are God’s dear children, shouldn’t you be blessed more than those who are not?”

Satan tries to create doubt in God’s promises. He wants you and me to take our eyes off of the true blessings in life and fasten them on those earthly blessings we don’t have. But he is wrong. God is not your dear Father only if everything in life goes your way. He is not your Heavenly Father only if you have nice things to enjoy in this life. You are not His child only if He keeps sickness, suffering, and sorrow away from you. Here is what God says. His Word is sure and certain. You are His dear child because you are baptized into Christ Jesus. He is your dear Father no matter how much or how little you have, because He has brought you to faith in Jesus.

God wants you to take your eyes off the word “if,” and fasten them upon Jesus Christ. He strove with Satan and He won. He was crucified for you. He defeated sin, death, and hell by His death and resurrection. He was tempted, just like you, and He overcame. He did not fall. He, rather, felled Satan with the Word of God.

And so why do we still give in? Why do God’s people in Augusta give in to temptation when Jesus already defeated Satan? And here’s where Satan sinks his fangs into us. “So, you’re a Christian,” he says, “then why do you fail to live like one? If you really were a

Christian you wouldn't give in to temptation so easily." He knows how deadly that word "if" can be. And so he delights in using it against us.

And he doesn't really mind when preachers preach Jesus Christ as long as they preach Him as "example," and not as Savior. Today in church buildings all across this land, listeners are hearing this story of Jesus' temptation in the desert, but they are hearing the message that we should strive to be like Jesus. "Jesus overcame temptation with the Word of God, and that is how we should do it. He is our example for how to defeat Satan."

But when Jesus is preached this way, that little word "if" raises its ugly head again. "If I live more like Jesus, then I know I'm His disciple." "If I follow Jesus' example, I can overcome temptations in my life." Friend, if you were drowning, would you want the lifeguard to show you, from the shore, how to save yourself...or would you want him to come and rescue you? The truth is that we're not strong enough to save ourselves. We don't need directions from Jesus on how to defeat Satan—we need our "Lifeguard" to jump in and save us! Even if a drowning victim knew what to do, he would be too weak to fight the undertow. You and I are no match for Satan. Our only hope is that Jesus comes to us, not to be our example, but our Savior.

And that's just what He does. He did not defeat Satan in the desert to show you how. He defeated Satan for you because you cannot. We don't sing, "A Mighty Example is Our God," but rather, "A Mighty Fortress." "He helps us free from every need, that hath us now o'ertaken. With might of ours can naught be done; soon were our loss effected. But for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected." When, in that hymn, we sing, "One little word can fell him"—that's not our word, it's Jesus'. His word to you, that you are His baptized child, is what conquers Satan. Jesus' word to you that your sins are forgiven, is the word that keeps you from drowning in the depths of hell.

Now it's not wrong to pattern our life after Jesus. In fact, we should—the Bible urges us to. But that's not why Jesus lived the way He did. It's good to strive to live a holy life as Jesus did, but He lived His holy life not to teach you how—as your example—but because He is your Savior. He lived without sin for you, so that in your baptism He now gives you His holy life, and that innocence covers over all your sins.

It's good that we approach death as Jesus did—trusting firmly in the Heavenly Father. Yet, He died not to show you how—He died for you. His death is your life because that life is given to you in His body and blood at His Holy Supper.

It may be good to watch a lifeguard swim. Watching his technique may help us to swim better. But that's not why the lifeguard is on the shore. He is not there to be an example to the swimmers. He is there to save swimmers from drowning. Everything Jesus did in His life He did for you. From His birth to His death and resurrection, and everything in between—He did it all to save you from Satan's hell.

What this story of Jesus' temptation in the desert does teach us is that you and I do not overcome temptation—Jesus does. For you and me to withstand temptation, it's not going to come from our inner strength; it will come from Christ in us. Consider this analogy: A person who is dying from a disease is not going to overcome the disease on his own. He needs the medicine to come into his body, and with that medicine inside of him, it will fight

against the disease for him. Christ who came into you in your baptism, and who comes into you through His Word and Sacrament, is the “Medicine” that fights for you. We are dying of sin, but Jesus fights Satan’s temptations for you from within you. That Medicine is our only hope. In the desert He won against Satan, and within your heart and life He will continue to fight so that you are victorious in Him.

Do you have loved ones who have stopped taking the Medicine? Oh how we here, at Christ Lutheran Congregation, need to encourage each other to be in the Word daily and weekly, and at His Supper often. We will not overcome sin and the devil on our own. Christ, our Medicine, is our only hope.

Friend, He is on your side. Christ is not against you—He is for you. He is not for you if you love Him. He is for you because He loves you; because you are His dear child in Holy Baptism. He is on your side even though you and I fail to use His Word as we should. Even though we play with Satan’s temptations, Christ is for you. And He forgives you... not if you change your ways—He forgives you because of His mercy and grace upon you.

There are no “ifs,” “ands,” or “buts” about it. Jesus died for you. You are forgiven. No matter what Satan says; no matter how often you fall—God’s Word to you is sure and certain. He forgives each one of you for Jesus’ sake, and believing that word of forgiveness, Satan has no chance against you. He is defeated, not by you, but by Christ who is for you and in you. Amen.